

# Spiritual Autobiography

Comparative Literature

Spring Semester 1998

Jana Evans Braziel, Instructor

Office: 403 South College

Hours: by Appointment

## Course Description:

The course will probe a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural study of four individual writers (two mid-century and French, two contemporary and Anglophone), looking at how these writers explore both autobiography and cultural, political marginalization: Jean Genet (French) and Marguerite Duras (French, from the former colony French-Vietkong) during the post-war and decolonization period, as well as later; and the contemporary writers, Ben Okri (Nigerian) and Jamaica Kincaid (African-Caribbean, now living in the United States), within a postcolonial historical context.

The course emphasis will be on "repetition and difference" in autobiographical writing; exploring representations of the self through writing, re-writing, repeating and altering literary representations of the self and the family or society. Through these autobiographical and in some cases, auto-fictional writings, we will interrogate the constructions of the genre autobiography, the subjective category the self, and the term spiritual. The following questions are germane to this critical interrogation: How are these three terms defined? What constitutes autobiography? What composes a self, and is this category a fixed, stable, coherent, and unified one? What is meant by the word spiritual? How does one differentiate the spiritual from the social, the sexual, the material, the political, the historical, the intellectual, and even the banal?

## Required Texts:

### **Books:**

All books are available at Atticus Albion Bookstore, Amherst.

Marguerite Duras, *The Sea-Wall*

*The Lover*

*The North China Lover*

Jean Genet, *The Thief's Journal*

*The Prisoner's Notebook*

Jamaica Kincaid, *At the Bottom of the River*

*Annie John*

*Autobiography of My Mother*

Ben Okri, *Stars of the New Curfew*

*Famished Road*

### **Other Texts:**

Photocopies to be distributed in class.

Selected poems from *The complete Poems of Jean Genet*, translated by David Fisher. South San Francisco, CA: ManRoot, 1981.

Secondary Sources on Marguerite Duras, Jean Genet, Ben Okri and Jamaica Kincaid

### Course Requirements:

- **Class Participation** (20% of final course grade): requires regular attendance; interaction with other students in group discussions; participation in class discussion; completion of brief written responses (in-class or over-night) to questions germane to the autobiographical texts; and occasional quizzes (announced or unannounced) over readings.
- **Autobiographical Essay** (20%): Each student will write an autobiographical essay in two separate drafts during the semester. A list of possible autobiographical topics will be assigned for the essay. The autobiographical writing should be creative, detail-rich, descriptive prose. Focus on vivid images, highly specific and sensate language. Avoid generalizations, abstractions (unless grounded in a tangible "moment"), wordiness, vagueness, and weak statements of feelings (show the emotion; don't tell it!). Format: 8-10 pages (double-spaced; typed); 10-12 point font (no cursive fonts please); 1" margins. Please note: *Papers that do not adhere to the above format will not be accepted; papers less than a full eight pages will not be accepted.* Due Dates: **First Draft:** March 3; **Final Draft:** April 16.
- **Oral Presentation** (20% of course grade): Each student will orally present one of the secondary sources on Duras, Genet, Okri or Kincaid, outlining the major ideas of the essay, critiquing the essayist's argument and formulating several (5-6) discussion questions related to one (or both) of the writers on the syllabus. Each student should prepare a 1-2 page handout to accompany their presentation for class distribution. The oral presentations should be approximately 15-20 minutes in length; however, the presentation should generate substantial class discussion (led by the presenter, but also facilitated by the instructor) about the secondary source and the autobiographical author.
- **Midterm Examination** (20%): The midterm will be an take-home discussion and essay format exam, evaluating your ability to critically analyze the assigned literary texts and to discuss the autobiographical works in relation to the themes addressed in the secondary readings and in class discussions. For the exam, the written responses should utilize analytical prose, correct grammar and punctuation. The responses should intelligently explore ideas generated by the novels and essays read prior to the midterm. Exam Date: March 24, 1998.
- **Final Paper** (20%): The Final Examination will consist of an 8-12 pp. paper (10-12 pt. font; double-spaced, typed) on a comparative topic. The paper should be a formal literary analysis of three of the literary texts, utilizing assigned essays for each of the novels. Format: 8-12 pages (double-spaced; typed); 10-12 point font (no cursive fonts please); 1" margins. Please note: *Papers that do not adhere to the above format will not be accepted; papers less than a full eight pages will not be accepted.* Due Date: May 18, 1998.

### Course Policies:

- **Attendance:** Only three absences are allowed during the session: if you are ill, verification will be required. All unexcused absences beyond the initial two will result in a final course grade reduction of half a letter grade per day. Students who miss more than six unexcused absences during the semester will fail the course.
- **Academic Honesty:** *Undergraduate Rights & Responsibilities. 1996-1997*, distributed by the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and the Office of the Provost, states: "Intellectual honesty requires that students demonstrate their own learning during examinations and other academic exercises, and that other sources of information or knowledge be appropriately credited. Scholarship depends upon the reliability of information and reference in the work of others. No form of cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, or facilitating of dishonesty will be condoned in the University community" (32).

Course Schedule:

January

- 29 Introduction to Course: review of syllabus and course objectives; explorations of terms germane to the course: *spiritual; autobiography; colonialism; decolonization; postcolonialism; subjectivity*; and *representation*.

February

- 3-5 Introduction to Course: review of syllabus and course objectives; explorations of terms germane to the course: *spiritual; autobiography; colonialism; decolonization; postcolonialism; subjectivity*; and *representation*.

Marguerite Duras, *The Sea-Wall* (1949)

Secondary Source:

- O'Neill, Kevin C.. "Structures of Power in Duras's *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*," *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, Boise, ID. 1991, 45:1 2, 47-60.

10-12 Marguerite Duras, *The Lover* (1984)

Secondary Sources:

- Chester, Suzanne. "Writing the Subject: Exoticism/Eroticism in Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* and *The Sea Wall*," in Smith Sidonie (ed.); Watson Julia (ed.). *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, 436-57.
- Murphy, Carol J.. "Duras' *L'Amant*: Memoirs from an Absent Photo," in *Remains to be Seen: Essays on Marguerite Duras*, edited by Sanford Scribner Ames. New York: Peter Lang, 1988.
- Cohen, Susan D. "Fiction and the Photographic Image in Duras' *The Lover*," *L'Esprit Createur*, Lexington, KY. 1990 Spring, 30:1, 56-68.
- Morgan, Janice. "Fiction and Autobiography/Language and Silence: *L'Amant* by Duras," *The French Review: Journal of the American Association of Teachers of French*, Champaign, IL. 1989 Dec., 63:2, 271-279;
- Hellerstein, Nina S. "Family Reflections and the Absence of the Father in Duras' *L'Amant*," *Essays in French Literature*, 1989 Nov. 26, 98-109.
- Hewitt, Leah. "Rewriting Her Story, from Passive to Active: Substitution in Marguerite Duras," in *Autobiographical Tightropes*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990.

17-19 Marguerite Duras, *The North China Lover* (1986)

24-26 Jean Genet, *The Thief's Journal* (1948-1949) and selections from *The complete Poems of Jean Genet*

### Secondary Sources:

- White, Edmund. "Once a Sodomite, Twice a Philosopher," *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*, 1996 Fall, 3:1, 15-17.
- Bersani, Leo. "The Gay Outlaw," *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism*, Baltimore, MD. 1994 Summer-Fall, 24:2-3, 5-18.

### March

3-5 *Thief's Journal*; Selections from Sartre's Saint Genett

#### Secondary Sources:

- Selections from Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*
- Skakoon, Walter S.. "Romance and resentment: Saint Genet," in *Sartre Alive*, edited by Ronald Aronson and Adrian van den Hoven. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991, pp. 269-82.
- Kaplan, H. J.. "The Apostle of Inversion," *The New Criterion*, New York, NY. 1993 Nov, 12:3, 68-72.

10-12 Jean Genet, *The Prisoner's Notebook* (1983-1986)

#### Secondary Sources:

- De Grazia, Edward. "An Interview with Jean Genet," *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature*, New York, NY. 1993 Fall, 5:2, 307-24. AMHERST COLLEGE
- Walker, David H.. "Un Captif amoureux: Poetry and Politics," *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Oxford, England. 1995 Oct, 31:4, 312-25.
- Davis, Colin. "Un Captif amoureux and the Commitment of Jean Genet," *French Studies Bulletin: A Quarterly Supplement*, Nottingham, England. 1987 Summer, 23, 16-18.

14-23 **SPRING BREAK**

24-26 Ben Okri, *Stars of the New Curfew* (1988)

#### Secondary Sources:

- Nnolim, Charles E. *Approaches to the African Novel: Essays in Analysis*. London: Saros, 1992.
- Ross, Jean W. "Contemporary Authors Interview." *Contemporary Authors*. Ed. Donna Olendorf. vol. 138. Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Inc., 1993. 337- 341.
- Wilkinson, Jane. "Ben Okri." *Talking with African Writers*. Ed. Jane Wilkinson. London: Heinemann, 1991. 76-89.

31-4/2 Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (1991)

#### Secondary Sources:

- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Between the Living and the Unborn." *New York Times Book Review* 13 Aug. 1989: 3, 20.
- Hawley, John C. "Ben Okri's Spirit-Child: Abiku Migration and Postmodernity." *Research in African Literatures* 26.1 (1995): 20-29.
- Nnolim, Charles E.. "The Time Is Out of Joint: Ben Okri as a Social Critic," *Commonwealth Novel in English*, Bluefield, WV. 1993 Spring-Fall, 6:1-2, 61-68.
- Ogunsanwo, Olatubosun. "Intertextuality and Post-Colonial Literature in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*." *Research in African Literatures* 26.1 (1995): 30-39.
- Wright, Derek. "Imagined and Other Worlds: Magic History in Kojou Laing's Search Sweet Country and Ben Okri's *The famished road*," in *New Directions in African Fiction*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997.

## April

7-9 *The Famished Road*

14-16 *The Famished Road*

21-23 Jamaica Kincaid, *At the Bottom of the River* (1978, 1984)

### Secondary Source:

- Timothy, Helen Pyne. "Adolescent Rebellion and Gender Relations in At the Bottom of the River and Annie John," in *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, edited by Selwyn R Cudjoe. Wellesley : Calaloux, 1990. xii, 233-42.

28-30 Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John* (1983)

### Secondary Sources:

- Murdoch, H. Adlai. "Severing the (M)other Connection: The Representation of Cultural Identity in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*," *Callaloo: A Journal of African American and African Arts and Letters*, Baltimore, MD. 1990 Spring, 13:2, 325-340.
- Donnell, Alison. "When Daughters Defy: Jamaica Kincaid's Fiction," *Women: A Cultural Review* 1993 Spring, 4:1, 18-26. AMHERST COLLEGE
- Donnell, Alison. "She Ties Her Tongue: The Problems of Cultural Paralysis in Postcolonial Criticism," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, Calgary, AB, Canada. 1995 Jan, 26:1, 101-16.

## May

5-7 Jamaica Kincaid, *Autobiography of My Mother* (1996)

12-14 *Autobiography of My Mother*

### Related Films & Videos:

- *Jean Genet* [videorecording]. Hanover, N.H. : Ediciones del Norte, c1982. 1videocassette (VHS) (52 min.): sd., col. ; 1/2 in. ADD: Filmography for Duras
- *Poison* [videorecording], a film by Todd Haynes; Zeitgeist Films; Bronze Eye Productions in association with Arnold A. Semlor. New York: Fox Lorber Home Video, 1992.
- *Tearoom trade* [videorecording]. Ballerino Productions; a videotape by Christopher Johnson. Amherst, Mass.: Ballerino Productions, 1994. 1 videocassette (12 min.): sd., col. ; 1/2 in..
- *Ben Okri* [videorecording]. ICA Video, in conjunction with Trilion; director, Fenella Greenfield. Northbrook, IL: ICA Video, c1989. 1 videocassette (40 min.): sd., col.; 1/2 in.
- *Caribbean women writers: the first international conference* [videorecording], written and produced by Selwyn R. Cudjoe.